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ABSTRACT

Educators have been critized for being unable to develop any firm plans for the use of Australia's Domestic Communications Satellite (AUSSAT). However, conferences, talks, and papers have resulted in some significant achievements. First, it is now possible to raise issues of communications and telecommunications planning at the very highest administrative levels in many state or territory departments of education; second, the glamor and publicity surrounding AUSSAT has led to a re-examination of educational telecommunications in general; and third, AUSSAT'S recent price structure announcement made specific reference to educational users. It now remains for (1) educational planners to realize that they have been encouraged to use AUSSAT; (2) the infrastructure which will result from recent government decisions on access to AUSSAT to be carefully examined; (3) negotiation to be pursued with potential Radiated Subscription Television Services for use of their facility to distribute educational and other non-commercial programming, if such a service is launched; and (4) funding of communication planning studies in the educational and non-profit sectors to be made a priority. AUSSAT's most important benefit might be in encouraging planners to examine their present and future communication system needs rationally. (LMM)

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Australia's Domestic Communication Satellite and Education
Has Education Missed the Boat?

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Paper presented at the Australian Film and Television School seminar "After AUSSAT....?", Regent Hotel, Sydney, March 31, 1984

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

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Introduction

Today's seminar is concerned with the use of AUSSAT by three important sectors of the community..the first is education, the second is the arts, and the third is non-commercial television. At first glance the arts, education and non-commercial television appear to have little in common, but as far as planning for the use of AUSSAT is concerned these three areas share some crucial common characteristics.

What are those characteristics? In the first place educational services, the arts and non-commercial television activities are largely funded by governments. Client contributions are almost always dwarfed by government funding support. Second, the improvement of an educational, arts or non-commercial television service almost always entails a increased financial drain on the supplier of that service. (This is quite different from a commercial operation where new services are offered in the hope of providing increased income and profit). Third, educational and arts programs are largely labour intensive with fixed recurrent costs consuming most of the financial resources. And, as a consequence of these characteristics, many of the institutions involved in these areas have a reputation for conservatism and resistance to change.

The Problem

Today I plan to present an account of educational planning for AUSSAT. And given my suggestion that educational, arts and non-commercial television organizations share many characteristics I feel that it should be possible to relate my account of educational planning to these other areas.

From time to time over the last couple of years I have received quite similar calls from concerned educational administrators. They have just heard that managers in a particular Commonwealth department have decided that as far as the domestic communication satellite is concerned, "education has missed the boat". The Commonwealth public servants have come to this decision because educators have been unable to come up with any firm plans for the use of the domestic communication satellite when it is launched in 1985.

In today's paper I want to test the accuracy of this claim. I plan to look at educational responses to the forthcoming launch of AUSSAT. I will try to explain why these responses have been made. And finally, I will sketch my suggestions for future action.

The Recent Past

Ever since an Australian domestic communication satellite system was first mooted, educators have taken an active role in the debate. The involvement of educators was encouraged because some politicians saw educational uses of the proposed satellite as a major political selling point of the project. The improvement of educational services in the outback became a major theme in the early stages of selling the satellite.

This political selling point had quite an impact on some sectors of the educational community. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) mobilized its forces. The improvement of outback telephony, the communication systems used by the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and the Schools of the Air became one of the ICPA's major political objectives. (The appointment of a member of the Executive of the ICPA to the Board of AUSSAT is a reminder of that political activity.)

While the ICPA was mobilizing its impressive political forces and directing them at the Liberal-National Party coalition other educators, were meeting to discuss the educational applications of the proposed satellite system. At a rough count at least five conferences were held. These were organized by the Centre for Continuing Education of the Australian National University in February 1979, the University of Western Australia in December 1979, the Australian College of Education in February 1980, Deakin University in December 1980 and SAT-USERS in October 1981.(Deacon,1979; Deacon,1980; Australian College of Education,1980; Australian Satellite Users Association,1981) Other meetings concerned with general satellite planning issues had educational sections, too.

As a result of these conferences the precursor of SAT-USERS was formed. This organization's purpose was to coordinate non-commercial access to the satellite and lobby for the development of a satellite access policy which would be attractive to the small non-commercial user. Potential educational users played a significant role in the formation of SAT-USERS.

Even a cursory reading of the proceedings of these conferences and the literature prepared by SAT-USERS shows that educators were attempting to come to grips with the possibilities afforded by a domestic communication satellite. Their deliberations were sometimes confused by a lack of knowledge of costs and system capabilities. Discussions were also hampered by the drawing of faulty analogies with educational satellite experiences in the U.S. and Canada. In those countries literally millions of dollars had been pumped into projects, some of which were of dubious educational value.

During the same period the Conference of the Directors-General of Education set up a Working Party on the Educational Use of a Communications Satellite. With representatives of the Commonwealth and each state and territory, the Working Party

recommended that a series of educational trials of telecommunications technologies be initiated. The funding of educational trials would be shared by the Commonwealth and the States or Territories (Conference of the Directors-General of Education,1981).

These recommendations led to the establishment of the Commonwealth/State Advisory Committee on the Educational Use of Communications Technology (ACEUCT) in 1982. In the first two years of its three year life the ACEUCT will spend about $111,000 on trials of the educational use of telecommunications and communications technologies.These funds will be matched by the participating states and territories.Ten projects have already been funded (White,1983:75).

In addition to the funding of trials and demonstrations the ACEUCT has funded the coordination of the Kangaroo Network, a network of nineteen low-cost satellite ground stations. These are owned and operated by educational and other non-profit institutions. The network uses the U.S owned ATS-1 satellite (Kangaroo Network,1983). The ACEUCT has also funded the preparation and distribution of Satellites, telecommunications and education: A resource guide for Australian educators (White,1983).

Another project which was coordinated by, but not funded by the ACEUCT, involved the development of satellite/terrestrial communication system plans for the School of the Air in N.W. Queensland. This was conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Communication and the Queensland Department of Education and will result in a substantial educational trial being conducted in conjunction with AUSSAT in 1985 (Davies and Gillam,1983; Kitt, Davies and Gillam,1983).

Concurrent with the activities of the ACEUCT in the primary and secondary sectors the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission has funded a study of the communication needs of tertiary educational institutions in Western Australia. Also, the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia (RFDSA) has just released a study of a satellite network which would be used for emergency communications, support for Aboriginal communities, remote telephony and the transmission of educational services such as those of the Schools of the Air (Nichols and Associates, 1984). Other less formal planning discussions are underway in the TAFE and university sectors.

The Current Situation

But where do things stand at the moment? Is the educational sector in any position to make use of AUSSAT when it is launched in 1985 ? Has education missed the boat?

A hard-nosed critic of the educational sector could quite rightly say that there are no clear plans for the educational use of AUSSAT. All the activities which I have outlined could be seen as

pre-planning activities which have not resulted in any firm commitments.

These criticisms are quite valid but it must be remembered that the rules of access to the AUSSAT have only just been decided. In addition, AUSSAT rates have only recently been announced and there are still a number of significant cost issues which remain to be clarified. Given the political and economic ambiguity which surrounded AUSSAT until quite recently there is every reason for potential educational and a large number of potential commercial users to be at the preliminary stages of planning. Even though there are no firm plans for permanent educational services using AUSSAT, the conferences, talks and papers generated over the last five years have resulted in some significant achievements.

First, it is now possible to raise issues of communications and telecommunications planning at the very highest administrative levels in many state or territory departments of education. Previously issues of communications planning were the province of enthusiasts who had no lines of communication to senior levels of policy making. Until quite recently education departments had not considered the new communications technologies as more than aids to education. This has changed so that various configurations of communications technologies are increasingly being seen as integral to the delivery of educational services.

Second, the glamour and publicity surrounding AUSSAT has led to a a re-examination of educational telecommunications in general. While senior policy makers might have been initially attracted by the use of the satellite, the debate about the use of the satellite often leads to a re-examination of the educational use of traditional telecommunication systems. For example, one of the most remarkable side effects of the satellite debate is the rediscovery of the telephone and telephone conferencing, a technique which has been a part of the repertoire of any self-respecting starting price bookmakers pricing service for years. So while TELECOM might wish that the satellite would just go away, it is quite likely that TELECOM as the supplier of traditional telecommunications services will benefit from customers who have been encouraged to re-examine their communication needs as a result of AUSSAT's entry into the market. Telecom will benefit when that re-examination leads consumers to decide that TELECOM is the best supplier of some new or expanded service.

Third, AUSSAT's recent price structure announcement made specific reference to educational users. Educational and research institutions are the only potential user groups being offered a twenty per cent discount on AUSSAT's standard rate. This is a most significant concession because offering a discount to one set of users might be seen a precedent for other groups which feel that they have legitimate grounds for a discounted rate, too. Educators must realize that this preferential rate is a most significant concession from AUSSAT.

The Tasks Ahead

Given this analysis of the past and the present, what needs to be done?

1. Educational planners needs to realize that they have been given every encouragement to make use of AUSSAT. If the opportunity is ignored without rational examination then educational planners have no one to blame but themselves.

2. There needs to be a careful examination of the infrastructure which will be created as a result of recent government decisions on access to AUSSAT. For example the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is the only television broadcasting organization which will be able to use the AUSSAT's high powered transponders in unencoded and zonal beams. The ABC will use these transponders for its Homestead and Community Broadcast Satellite Service (HACBSS) and this will be the only service which can be received by relatively low-cost receivers. (These are expected to cost about one thousand dollars.)

And given the ABC's long term commitment to educational broadcasting there is an urgent need for educational planners to consult with the ABC while the form and content of the HACBSS service is being decided. It is quite possible for the ABC to continue its educational broadcasting service as a part of its HACBSS service. It is also possible that the ABC could offer a new ranges of educational services as a part of the HACBSS service. And there is no reason why those new offerings should be restricted to the primary and secondary sectors. (While the HACBSS audience is disadvantaged as far as television and radio programming is concerned, they are equally disadvantaged in the area of higher and continuing education.)

3. The Australian broadcasting and communications infrastructure will be greatly changed by any Government decision to launch Radiated Subscription Television (RSTV) services. In the discussions leading up to that decision there is almost certainly going to be an opportunity for negotiations with potential RSTV operators so that their facilities can be used for the distribution of educational and other non-commercial programming.

The proposal that educational and non-profit television services be piggy-backed on commercial services has been made by commercial organizations in the past. It was proposed to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal during the cable and subscription television inquiry and Television Australia-Satellite Systems has offered to develop a hybrid commercial/educational service in the outback.

4. There is a need to continue with the funding of trials in the educational and non-commercial use of various communications technologies. But there is a growing need for the funding of planning studies and the development of planning expertise in the

educational and non-commercial sector. The N.W. Queensland School of the Air planning studies and the work undertaken for the Royal Flying Doctor Service are examples of exercises which need to be undertaken by many potential educational and non-commercial users. Until many more planning exercises have been completed there is no chance that rational educational decision making can prevail. As a consequence, the funding of communication planning studies in the educational and non-profit sectors should now be a top priority.

Concluding Remarks

Whether or not AUSSAT becomes an important communication link for Australian educators is not really important. The most important benefit of AUSSAT might be that it encourages planners to rationally examine their present and future communication system needs. If this happens, AUSSAT will have played an important role even if the results of that examination lead to the development of non-satellite communication systems.

We can see that the existence of AUSSAT is forcing a re-examination of past assumptions in the broadcasting policy area. Questions of localism and the role of networks must be re-examined in the light of a system which encourages national networking and obliterates traditional notions of broadcast service areas. If the mere existence of AUSSAT can encourage the same thing in the educational communications area, then educational services will have been improved and AUSSAT will have played an important role. If this re-examination also occurs in the delivery of the arts and non-commercial television, the unintended benefits of AUSSAT will be even greater.

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